

Council renews cable commission

by Douglas Tallman

Staff Writer

A commission that hears complaints about cable companies will continue to exist, but legislation that would have extended its jurisdiction failed after debate Tuesday by the Montgomery County Council.

The debate flummoxed supporters of the plan, who were expecting easy passage.

"I'm disappointed because I think folks were reading it wrong," said Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton.

Organized in May 2003, the Cable Compliance Commission has five members who meet monthly to rule on subscriber complaints that have not been resolved by the county's Office of Cable and Communication Services.

Legislation authorizing the commission was to run out in December, and on Tuesday the council passed a three-year extension.

Stripped from the extension was a provision that would give prospective subscribers the right to bring complaints to the commission. That provision is what sparked the controversy.

Non-subscribers have tried to use the cable franchise agreement to force Comcast to provide cable service to their neighborhoods.

Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring called the provision a "sham" because it would not help residents who want cable television extended to their

homes. That power rests only with the Office of Cable and Communication Services.

What I don't like is legislation that says it does something that it doesn't," Silverman said.

Four other council members — Michael E. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, Michael L. Surlin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg, Nancy M. Flanagan (D-At large) of Garrett Park and Howard A. Lewis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase — agreed, and the provision was stripped.

Praisner said the commission can weigh individual cases. When the cable office issues orders, it is looking at cumulative cases, she said.

The move comes just as the number of complaints has spiked against Comcast, the politically connected company providing cable and Internet service to 200,000 Montgomery County homes.

For the first five months of 2005, the company averaged about 100 complaints. But in June, the number rose to 265, and 106 have been received for the first 12 days of July, according to cable office data.

A company representative could not be reached for comment, but Comcast officials have blamed service interruptions on Verizon employees and contractors as that company lays wire to extend its network. Verizon officials did not return calls.

Comcast service will be the subject of a July 25 meeting of the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee in Rockville.